

Demystifying the Democratic Transition in Venezuela

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Venezuela has been in crisis for decades now, and the struggle to restore democracy has been nothing but linear. Yet, as necessary factors, such as a united opposition, the pressure from the international community and mass mobilization come together, democratization does not seem to be too far ahead. [Political science literature](#) has conceptualized transitions as the interval between one political regime and another. Applying this to probably the most observed transition process today, in Venezuela transition would imply moving from an authoritarian regime to "something else", and, in the best of cases, to a democracy. The crucial issue here, is that this process is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty meaning that the rules of the game are not set anymore, which is why the main actors, government and opposition, struggle to define the rules and procedures of that transition and the subsequent regime.

This uncertainty, however, does not only occur only on an elite level. It is basically everywhere. Citizens, reporters, IGO's and NGO's and even the international community cannot be certain about what is going on and will happen in the near future. Ultimately, this leads to wrong or misguided interpretations of the unfolding transition process.

A Coup d'État by other means?

One issue being raised, probably to discredit the opposition's actions, is whether Guaidó's swearing in as interim president represents just another *Coup d'État* attempt by different means. Let's review this claim.

Nicolás Maduro 'won' a skewed elections last May, which the opposition decided to boycott because there was no free and fair electoral contestation or uncertainty about who would eventually win. As a result, the country's opposition and large parts of the international community did not recognize his sham victory. If there was no legitimate election, there cannot be a legitimate president. In consequence, this means Maduro's constitutional term officially ended on January 9, 2019 at midnight.

As per the Venezuelan constitution, on January 10, a legitimately and democratically elected president, had to be sworn in. Because Venezuela did not have a duly elected and democratically legitimate president, the National Assembly declared the presidency vacant. Following the vacancy of the presidency, and in agreement with Article 233 of the Venezuelan constitution, the president of the National Assembly, Guaidó, was sworn in as *interim president* to call free and fair elections with the end goal of choosing a new executive.

Even though it may seem like a minor detail to distinguish between 'being sworn in as interim president' and 'declaring himself president' it is essential to do so because not differentiating implies 1) ignoring the country's constitutional framework 2) and getting to the wrong conclusions about what is happening in Venezuela.

Another instance of US intervention?

Another prevalent narrative is that what is happening in Venezuela is the result of a US intervention. This false narrative has only two purposes: 1) to discredit the opposition and 2) give Maduro time to figure out his next steps to hold on to power. While it is true that the US has had a long history of international intervention in Latin America, the events that are unfolding in Venezuela right now are not the result of US intervention or external imposition. Giving all the credit, or blame, to the Trump administration takes away from Venezuelans' struggle and sacrifices for re-establishing democracy.

International pressure on incumbents to respect democratic norms, sanctions of violations of international law and support for opposition parties and civil society groups is often benign. Scholarship has consistently found that [international pressure](#) is often crucial in bringing about democratization. After Venezuela's clear move towards full fledged authoritarianism, economic mismanagement, exponentially growing humanitarian crisis and mass exodus, the Western hemisphere has decided to change their discourse. Now world powers, including the EU, the US and Canada as well as the majority of Latin American countries have recognized Maduro as an illegitimate president, while also largely backing up Guaidó as interim president.

However, to be clear, this international involvement does not equal international intervention. These are two different things that both the regime and international sympathizers have tried to equate. It is true that some transitions to democracy, as in Central America, have been the result of overt international intervention, however, that is not what is occurring in Venezuela today. Naming and shaming the Maduro administration and recognizing and bolstering the legitimacy of Guaidó are qualitatively different from the military adventures and CIA orchestrated coups of the 20th century.

While we cannot be certain that all actors within the opposition reject a potential intervention, most members of the opposition and the Venezuelan population do not want or have asked for international intervention. What they want is clear international refutation of the Maduro regime's authoritarian practices, identification of its lacking legitimacy and diplomatic pressure to finally hold free and fair elections.

The efflorescence of the opposition

If we are not witnessing an elite *Coup d'État* or external imposition of regime change in Venezuela, what is going on?

I would argue that the resurgence of strategic action by a unified opposition and mass mobilization are key components of the new scenario we are witnessing in Venezuela today. It is important to recall that previous opposition demobilization, atomization and demoralization has been largely a result of both Chávez and Maduro's targeted actions to prevent a political alternative to emerge. While internal fights did also lead to a lack of transparency and credibility, repression of protest, incarceration of opposition leaders and other measures greatly debilitated organized opposition to the Maduro regime. Today, the opposition is now in better shape for two reasons.

First, the fresh leadership has helped to unite a highly fragmented opposition. It is being led by someone young, seemingly fearless but cautious at the same time. For the first time, it is the opposition who is setting the rules of the game, which Maduro and his coalition never saw coming. By being sworn in as president, Guaidó raised the stakes to a political maximum with the goal of breaking the ruling coalitions. As the literature on elite bargaining during democratic transition has pointed out, internal schisms are often central to breaking an incumbent's hold on power.

In Venezuela, right now, pretty much everything is in the hands of the military, who until today have been loyal to Maduro for very obvious reasons. Torture, human rights violations, and corruption are only a few out of many violations they have committed. Now it is for them to decide whether to follow the constitution and recognize Guaidó as the legitimate president or to continue under Maduro's grip. The way I am describing these dynamics do not reflect the complex reality many officials are living through. While the high ranks do support Maduro seemingly unconditional, middle and lower ranks would be willing to flip, particularly after the Amnesty Law passed by the National Assembly providing all military officials and civilians with immunity if they help restore democracy. Yet precisely these ranks and their families have been closely watched, targeted and even jailed over the past months.

Second, Guaidó has been able to secure widespread support from ordinary Venezuelans. His strategic moves would not be as challenging, or even credible, without the support of the thousands of Venezuelans who peacefully took to the streets on January 23. Despite the misery, hunger and lack of public services that Venezuelans live through every day, they decisively listened to their new leader and got together with a very simple demands: the cessation of the usurpation, the creation of a transitional government and free elections.

Parts of the literature on democratic transitions point to pressure from below. We know that civil society, labor, middle and upper classes, student movements, in short, 'the people' of a country are an extremely important engine to bring about transition.

A sui generis transition

The fact is that the Venezuelan opposition has initiated a *sui generis* transition process that Latin America has not seen before, and in fact relying on the country's own constitutional framework. This transition is not a *Coup d'État* or an instance

of external imposition. Rather it is the result of Venezuelans taking the fate of their country into their own hands and clamoring for democratic change.

Transition has started. We do not know when it will culminate into an actual visible regime change but we can assert that finally several factors that political science scholarship has identified are necessary for transitions, seem to be present in Venezuela. First, the opposition has recovered its [credibility and capacity to mobilize](#). Second, thousands and thousands of people have taken to the [streets](#) to demand democracy, despite of past violent repression of protests. Third, international pressure has helped to delegitimize the Maduro regime and give visibility and credibility to newly sworn-in president Guaidó. Finally, the dramatic events of the last few days might lead to defection and internal splits. With all these crucial factors of coming together, the question no longer is if there is going to be a transition to democracy in Venezuela but when.

Venezuela is leading the fourth wave of democratization in Latin America. The joint pressure of a united opposition, hand in hand with the pressure of the international community and the people, are creating new challenges for the Maduro regime. In this moment of high uncertainty, the only thing that is in fact certain is that transition has begun in Venezuela.

